

By SF World Can't Wait

Word of O's Bay Area trip triggered three groups here to quickly confer (World Can't Wait, Code Pink, ANSWER). We agreed to jointly call a protest at his Sunday arrival at a military/NASA base. We aimed for a vocal/visual protest focused on the war anniversary (not wishing to eXclude people raising other O-related causes if they came – but we agreed on the war as our focus.) There would be NO public near our demo (more below) so our goals were around what message we'd raise up via getting covered by the press.

We had only 48 hours lead time. The three groups issued e-announcements. We knew attendance was therefore likely to be limited. We worked on an “accordion plan” for goals and visuals (that could work if smaller OR larger numbers turned out). Main content points: focusing on the war meant the 10 year anniversary, Afghanistan and the KIND of war the U.S. has been waging there, also raising the whole regional and wider war situation involving other countries. World Can't Wait bounced off our Crimes are Crimes orientation in that context. Code Pink with a bold sign brought out the particularly horrendous aspect of the drones. We'd each be trying to drive home the message about responsibility of people here to speak out and act, not look on high for someone else to end these wars – i.e., we were not going to protest “so that O will hear us” but because the public needs to see and hear people speaking the truth about what O is actually doing (following in the war and torture footsteps of Bush-Cheney) and people need to be challenged to get involved in stopping these crimes, and this was an opening to say that.

So we wanted to be “there” when O arrived (however close we could get when the PRESS would see us. [We lacked time for a physical scope-out – we just aimed at what we understood to be where and when the press would be coming in. Last year at a similar arrival the police prevented any protest people or messages nearer than two whole blocks away.]

So we sent a core there to be in their right places THREE hours ahead. This turned out to be important; if instead we'd arrived only “on time” we would again have been stuck blocks away, because well before O-hour, all surrounding streets were blocked off. The cops were waiting for us, and tried to prevent protesters from being at the best visibility spot. It took them about 45

minutes to move us but we eventually had to regroup in an area slightly across the entrance road, behind a chain link fence, as “the designated free speech area” – this spot required us to be louder and more visible, to reach press and others entering the base – but we still could, and actually when the O motorcade did finally pass, we were on the side closest to its path, so it wasn’t all bad.

There were a LOT of law enforcement of many kinds there, and circling, and driving back and forth. Some were seemingly waiting for protesters, i.e. they had a plan about where they’d want to cordon us off, and at many times they way outnumbered us. We tried to tap on that from OUR viewpoint in our agitation, neither getting into an argument with the cops, but not accepting that the boundaries to our speaking out can be set this way either (“Is free speech only free if you have to stand where nobody can hear you??”). Wherever we had to stand, we fought for visibility i.e. despite the official orders to get behind the fence, somehow one or two of our gigantic signs stayed outside it. Others behind the fence found a patriotic statue (of a submarine) so they climbed up on it to be poised high up and visible with their signs. We posed a jumpsuited hooded “tortured prisoner” draped with huge black chains (plastic, go to H’ween store) up on the fence so any passing cars including the motorcade would be unable to avoid seeing.

While we dealt with the stream of cops coming to tell us what we couldn’t do – they wanted us invisible, we wanted to be boldly visible - we also had the opportunity to give interviews to reporters. [This action drew a whole range of the Chinese language press for some reason – print, TV, international – although no major US press.] Reporters were not unsympathetic, AND some were curious – be ready for these questions:

Why are you protesting here today?

Are you telling people to not vote for Obama?

Do you support the Obama critics who say he’s let Israel down [SEE NYT 9/25/11 full page ad by David Horowitz – do not let us get confused with that position!]

Why do you think O has NOT shut down G'mo (we'd been making a big deal of this)?

Again, these were “niche” reporters – the overseas Chinese press, the cable TV Chinese news station, the Chinese-English speaking diaspora press – but their questions aren't unlike what press asks more generally. Be ready and seek them out to give interviews to.

After a long time of back and forth with police, we were moved into the “sanctioned protest area” (visible to incoming traffic but behind a chain link fence) but we kept the visual goal in mind and made the most of it. Someone had brought many more clearly worded picket signs than we had people to hold up - we posted them all up along the fence. World Can't Wait had brought only over-sized signage – readable (and photogenic) from a distance - we were able to put it all up so the news and other cameras could get good angles. (These signs included displays explaining OUR reasons to protest Obama, versus the things the right wing is raising including in today's Horowitz NYT ad.)

We used ONE bullhorn with someone doing World Can't Wait agitation, soundbites to the passing traffic.

“If you're press and you're coming in to cover O's arrival – ask him questions! Ask the questions the world wants to understand!”

"Obama --Why are you committing war crimes in Afghanistan?"

"Why have one million Iraqis been killed during a war based on lies – there were no WMDs?"

"Why are you continuing the torture program set up by Bush-Cheney?" Etc. etc.

Later some people started pulling up in the area, families

and others coming to catch a glimpse as the motorcade drove past. There were young teens in that mix. Also various people obviously from a variety of local communities (African American, South Asian, young white couples). So we shifted our bullhorn conversation to address them. Asking if they oppose the endless wars, the torture – inviting if so to come across and stand with the protesters. Asking if they know the names Bradley Manning, telling about him and sending them to websites. Giving them words to Google. Emphasis was on you are being lied to, you can seek out the facts, there is a basic line here between accepting crimes behind excuse of “it save American lives/safety” and taking responsibility for stopping the crimes of our government.

When the helicopter began circling we knew the motorcade was moving and when it came into sight we focused all our visuals and bullhorn sounds toward it. The key points were:

Torture is a War crime

Aggressive war and slaughtering civilians in Afghan, Iraq, Pakistan..... is a war crime

Crimes are Crimes under Bush or Obama

War Crimes, War Crimes – Not In Our Name

Obama, Obama, you've got blood on your hands
From Iraq and Libya To Afghanistan

Again, this was not like a public event with anyone around we could talk with once the motorcade had passed. But if there were a crowd observing the incident we would sure love to delve into what they thought about it all!

